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**From Femme-Bot to Dominatrix:  
The Spectrum of Female roles  
within Science Fiction  
Cinematography and Literature**

Katherine Wegert

Female roles within the science fiction genre are typically an easy target for feminist critique. Within this context we usually see women representing one of two stereotypes; the victim or the dominatrix. Both are over-sexualized and both fulfill male fantasies. For example, in Philip K. Dick's novel, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, we meet Rachael Rosen, a femme-bot or android, who is docile, child-like, unemotional and detached, but also very sexual. She is the protagonist's object of desire, and represents the woman who says "no" but really means "yes" when it comes to sex. Rachael is exploited but is depicted to seem she enjoys fulfilling male power fantasies. On the other hand, we see the dominatrix of William Gibson's novel *Neuromancer*. She is confident, competent and equally skilled as her male counterparts. However, Molly is too hard, cold and masculine to represent a role model for femininity. She is dominating, unemotional, detached and over-sexualized. She is also a specific type of prostitute; she dominates and beats men during sex. Clearly, Molly's female strength crumbles as she fulfills the male fantasy; the woman who wants sex without emotional attachment. Can a strong female ever be correctly represented while upholding her femininity? Within science fiction, we see some of the most stereotypical representation of women. Many sci-fi literary works uphold anachronous views of male domination and

female inferiority. Their literature degrades and exploits women, defining them as sex objects. Because this genre is predominantly masculine, feminism and positive female portrayal is rare. By analyzing how women are presented in science fiction, and by defining strengths and weaknesses in various female characters, we can acquire the best possible representation of strong femininity. Furthermore, we can hope literature and film will move towards a more progressive, equal portrayal of masculinity and femininity.

In *The Matrix*, Trinity seems to find this balance as a strong female character. Throughout the movie, Trinity is portrayed as a leader and mentor. She is a tough member of the team and can physically defeat men. She is also caring and compassionate, and specifically has romantic feelings for Neo. Trinity is not over sexualized and her role is not focused on or defined by the fact that she is female. The final scenes get complicated as her role shifts into the predictable female romantic role. The love between Trinity and Neo is based on fate, faith and connection rather than sex, infatuation or domination. Trinity risks her life to save Neo by re-entering the matrix, and her kiss saves his life. It is Trinity's strength as a woman that saves Neo.

While Molly and Trinity are aggressive and strong women, Rachael Rosen is depicted as the docile, child-like machine. In Dick's, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, Deck, the protagonist, recognizes his attraction to Rachael immediately after meeting her, "Some female androids seemed to him pretty; he had found himself physically attracted by several, and it was an odd sensation, knowing intellectually they were machines but emotionally reacting anyhow" (Dick 95). This quote clearly shows the fantasy that Deck is beginning to develop, and his curiosity to engage in sex with an android. This passage continues to describe

Rachael: "No, he decided; she's too thin. No real development, especially in the bust. A figure like a child's, flat and tame," (Dick 95). Initially, Deck tried to deny his attraction to Rachael because he is married. He struggles with fantasizing over a femme-bot whom he knows is not real, but is in fact thinking about her sexually. Over time this attraction escalates and their relationship develops into something deeper and more intimate.

Fellow bounty hunter Phil Resch and Deckard later on discuss the empathy felt after killing Luba Luft, a female android. Resch believes that Deck is sexually attracted to Luba which creates a professional hindrance: "Because she-it-was physically attractive...We were taught it constitutes a prime problem in bounty hunting. Don't you know, Deckard, that in the colonies they have android mistresses?" (Dick 143). The fact that Resch describes this attraction to female robots, as well as the existence of android mistresses, only further proves femme-bot fantasy is common and accepted, and allows Deck's own fantasy to develop. Additionally, Resch says, "If it's love toward a woman or an android imitation, it's sex. Wake up and face yourself, Deckard. You wanted to go to bed with a female type of android --nothing more, nothing less," (Dick 143). Resch then disturbingly encourages Deck to sleep with an android before killing it as a way to fulfill his fantasy without risk of emotional attachment.

As Deck questions his feelings, he asks Rachael to accompany him to help identify and retire the other androids. He rents a hotel room and tells her to come down to San Francisco. When she asks why he says, "Something I heard today...About situations involving human men and android women," (Dick 183). Deck is referring to and exploring his desire to have sex with androids. Once she arrives, he studies her physically and reflects on his attraction to her, even

though she looks more like a girl than a woman (Dick 187). This is also a pedophiliac male fantasy; the desire to rape or have sex with young girls. Deck's attraction along his description of her child-like appearance verifies the presence of this fantasy. The two of them begin to get drunk, get on the bed and begin to kiss. Afterwards, Rachael seems to be unaffected or unchanged emotionally, "Leaning forward an inch, he kissed her dry lips. No reaction followed; Rachael remained impassive. As if unaffected," (Dick 189). Kissing is often seen as the epitome of emotional intimacy, connection and care, and is usually something a woman deeply desires. However, because Rachael is a robot, she lacks this emotional side and solely wants sexual pleasure, which is usually something a man deeply desires.

Rachael says she is too drunk to leave, proposes they go to bed together and begins undressing. Here she is trying to seduce him but makes him initiate sex. Women in Western society are taught to be pursued by men. Although she has strong sexual desire for Deck, she places herself in a position for him to take advantage of her, by undressing and getting drunk. Rachael wants him to initiate sex. Deck feels uncomfortable with the situation as he struggles internally with his desire. He believes he should not sleep with Rachael because she is robot and he is married. Rachael senses his hesitance and tries to persuade him, "'I'm not alive! You're not going to bed with a woman. Don't be disappointed; okay? Have you ever made love to an android before?'" (Dick 194). Deck is still tentative, so Rachael demands him to get into bed and they have sex. On one hand she appears to seduce him, but afterwards she blames Deck for the sexual encounter, "'We androids can't control our physical, sensual passions. You probably knew that; in my opinion you took advantage of me,'" (Dick 196). Women in American society are also taught

to not be sexually promiscuous and must deny their desires. After a woman sleeps with a man, she is supposed to feel guilty. Men often think women really want sex even if they resist it. Rachael is playing into this scripted role and is like the exploited female who really wanted sex, and arguably another male fantasy. This representation of women that Dick creates supports male domination and female oppression, rather than challenging these stereotypes in a predominantly masculine genre.

From the docile, child-like, passive female fantasy, we move to the other extreme within science fiction; the dominatrix. Unlike Rachael, *Neuromancer's* Molly is an overtly aggressive and sexual pursuer. Initially, one may view her as a strong female. She is confident, competent, independent and extremely skilled at the art of the ninja. She will never be subordinate to a man she is with sexually and must always be in control during intercourse. However, her image in *Neuromancer* is too hard, and masculine to be identified as a positive portrayal of strong femininity. When Molly first meets Case, she intimidates and threatens him:

'Molly, Case. My name's Molly. I'm collecting you for the man I work for. Just wants to talk, is all. Nobody wants to hurt you...'Cept I do hurt people sometimes, Case. I guess it's just the way I'm wired....you ever try to fuck around with me, you'll be taking one of the stupidest chances of your whole life.' (Gibson 25).

Molly is establishing her power over Case as a ninja and woman upon this introduction. Afterwards, Case wakes up suddenly, unaware he's been drugged. Molly is straddling him. She completely dominates him in this scene and Case has no choice but to have sex with her. The description of their sex

is also very raw and violent. There is no sensuality or connection between them: "She rode him that way, impaling herself...until they both had come...a vastness like the matrix, where the faces were shredded and blown away down hurricane corridors, and her inner thighs were strong and wet against his hips" (Gibson 33). Molly talks, acts and has sex like a man. She also denies her emotions like a man. Molly always has sunglasses on and spits, which we later learn is her form of crying; her tear ducts have been rerouted to flow into her mouth. She cannot show any emotion in her face. She has no emotional attachment to anyone or anything. This is vital to her failure as a strong female. Women depicted in science fiction struggle to establishing themselves among men while simultaneously trying to prevent being a male fantasy or an object of sexual desire. Male science fiction authors are perpetuating stereotypical female fantasies in their literature, instead of representing a strong woman positively. Molly cannot just be competent, but she must also be judged on her sexuality simply because she is a woman.

Although Molly seems unemotional, Riviera affects her through her sexuality and his desire for her. He puts on a projected hallucinatory show that portrays him having sex with an image that looks like Molly. Riviera projects this show in front of a large audience and shows him dominating her. We learn how Riviera fantasizes about Molly and she must sit there and watch is without showing emotion. He tortures her mentally in this scene, "'I don't know when I first began to dream of her...I couldn't quite hold her, hold her in my mind. But I wanted to hold her, hold her and more...'" (Gibson 140). Once Molly cannot take any more public exploitation, she flees immediately and Case goes running after her as he is equally disturbed by Riviera's projection. He finds her at the Chiba, an old hotel where people go to have sex with 'puppets' or

prostitutes. These women are computer programmed to not be fully conscious when they are used sexually. Before Molly was a ninja, she was a prostitute. She explains this past to Case:

You know how I got the money, when I was starting out? Here...Joke, to start with, 'cause once they plant the cut-out chip, it seems like free money. Wake up sore, sometimes, but that's it. Renting the goods, is all. You aren't in, when it's all happening. House has software for whatever a customer wants to pay for. (Gibson 147)

Molly's casual attitude about her sexual and mental abuse is very disturbing to Case, who is expecting her to be more emotionally expressive. Molly continues to explain how her computer cut-out chip got disturbed when the owner put in new software and because of this, she started to remember being abused. One time she woke up completely during sex and was so hurt and disturbed, that she left the Chiba. We do not see any of Molly's emotions physically in this scene, but we can infer she psychologically affected as she fled Riviera's projection. She is forced to deny and stifle her emotions like a man to remain a strong ninja woman.

Molly's past as a prostitute shows that she is an object of sexual desire and one that succumbs to men's needs. Even if she was not fully conscious during sex, she was being exploited and used. She still submitted to the male fantasy of dominating women in prostitution. Riviera shows his desire to have sex with Molly, which confirms her representation as the dominatrix. He fantasizes about Molly, which subordinates her, and because she has been exploited before, she cannot cope emotionally. This submission to men in conflict with her extremely masculine and overly strong character shows us how Gibson fails to create a strong female his novel. Her



strength becomes her weakness, because she is too strong. She represents the typical dominatrix and this fulfills a male fantasy; a woman who desires sex without emotional connection or attachment. Her breakdown in Riviera's scene and prostitution also weakens her character as a woman and shows her subordination to men.

In *The Matrix*, Trinity falls somewhere between the dominatrix and the passive femme-bot. She represents the best model for positive femininity in these three works. She is similar to Molly because she portrays physical and mental toughness: She is extremely skilled as a ninja. No one seems to be able to stand in her way; she can physically fight groups of men at a time. Trinity is also a leader and mentor to Neo. When she first introduces herself to him, her mysterious questions spark his curiosity and intrigues him to follow her. She does not threaten, intimidate or seduce him. Once Neo realizes who she is, he compliments her famous hack into the IRS and says, "I thought you were a man." She replies, "Most people do." This shows how Trinity's abilities are just as good as a man's in a stereotypically masculine arena; computers and technology. Once he follows her lead, Trinity explains their situation and skillfully removes the "bug" that has been planted inside of him. As Neo adjusts to his "awakened" life, we see Trinity develop more feminine traits. She passively observes him. Her interaction with the crew is docile and quiet. Trinity brings Neo food and tends to him while he rests, taking on a more domestic role. Their relationship develops but there is no overt sexual desire. She balances her hardness as a fighter with a tender, caring side. Her character is defined by this strong portrayal of femininity.

Trinity's compassion extends to her crew. Cipher is a betraying crew member who gives the enemy Agents Morpheus' location. As Cipher begins to kill members of the

ship and Morpheus gets captured, Trinity does not cry but empathizes with the dying crew members. She tries to clean up their blood and gently touches them, only to turn around and seek vengeance. However, Neo realizes he must save Morpheus by fighting the Agents. Trinity requests to come with him and Neo demands, "No!" At this moment, he is trying to establish new power over Trinity, who was formerly the advantaged leader and mentor. Instead of letting him go alone, Trinity says she is in second command, the current leader of the ship, and tells him to go to hell. This shows Trinity's strength and power, even over the man she is destined to love.

This leads us to the ending of the movie where Trinity's femininity get complicated. Throughout the movie, Trinity has presented a balanced femininity as the competent and strong but caring woman. However, the Oracle told her that she is destined to meet "The One" and love him. Essentially, her life's fate is to love and care for a man. This is what brings her to follow Neo into the matrix. As he lays there dying, Trinity kisses him. In this moment, Neo is brought back to life. As the kiss is a salvation for Neo, it may also undermine her feminine strength. Her kiss represents a gesture of love which, typically in science fiction, seems to define a woman's worth.

However, we ultimately see Trinity's strength shine though and can see this happening in the context of this moment. First of all, Trinity saves Neo by bringing him back to life. The conventional story would instead position the woman as the victim. Because Trinity is strong and competent, she can reverse the roles and save Neo. Throughout the film's entirety, there is no sexual exploitation or signs of explicit desire between Neo and Trinity. Trinity does show care and yearning for connectivity and this is evident towards the end and in the film's final moments. As much as a kiss may imply

that women are always define by their sexual and emotional attachment to men, Trinity is autonomous, independent and strong. She is not represented as a male fantasy, as Rachael Rosen and Molly are, but is a balance between these two extremes. Rachael is unemotional and detached but desires sex. She is a sex robot male fantasy. She portrays the latent desire of women in American society. Rachael also looks like a young girl, which also represents a male fantasy of pedophilia. Molly is the prostitute dominatrix; another male fantasy. Both of these female characters subordinate to men. In The Matrix, Trinity positively portrays a feminine role model and if anything, the kiss validates her ability to be powerful physically, mentally and emotionally.

After analyzing the strengths and weaknesses in each of these female characters, we have learned that a strong woman is competent and caring, skilled and loving. Trinity is represented as a powerful female able to maintain her femininity. Through characters such as Rachael Rosen in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* and Molly in *Neuromancer*, stereotypical sci-fi female roles are emulated. Although they are very different characters, both are depicted as exploited, inferior and sexualized women. While science fiction may often hold negative, stereotypical representations of women, Trinity's character thwarts this portrayal and can serve as an example for future science fiction literature and cinematography.

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